CALLED
Mark 1:14-2
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Dag Hammarskjold was one of the early and most distinguished Secretaries General of the United Nations. He was a fascinating man. A scholar and successful international banker, he was persuaded to enter the Swedish Foreign Service. From there he was elected Secretary General of the United Nations in 1953. He served for eight years, and died in an air crash while on a U.N. peace mission in Africa in 1961.

After he died, his personal journal was published under the title Markings. It revealed a deeply thoughtful man who, all his life, struggled with doubt and uncertainty about the purpose of his own life and the existence of God.

Gradually Hammarskjold could affirm himself and the God he addressed in one entry as:

"Thou
Whom I do not know
But whose I am..." (p. 215)

Slowly Hammarskjold concluded that something was at work in his life to which he must respond: something summoning, pushing, calling.

The book is a favorite of mine and one of the entries which I have turned on countless occasions and which has always cheered me is dated Whitsunday, 1961. He wrote:

> "I don't know Who - or What - put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone - or Something - and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self surrender, had a goal." (p. 205)

The essence of Christianity is saying "yes." Hammarskjold called Christianity "The Way," which is what it was called by the early Christians. It is a way, a living, a following, an answering, a saying "yes." It is not an ethical system. The essence of Christianity is not believing certain ideas about God. The essence of it is a relationship: an answer to a call. It is supported by a theology. We Presbyterians are the resident experts at expressing our religion intellectually. It also spawns an ethical system, a morality. There has never been much agreement about what the morality is, as anyone who ventures into the public crossfire on issues like abortion quickly learns. But a morality is part of what Christianity produces. Yet ethics is not the essence of it. If it were, we would still be Pharisees. The essence is hearing the summons, the call, and answering it, as in getting up from your fishing nets and following Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his powerful work, The Cost of Discipleship, began by focusing on the astonishing transaction which occurs in our text this morning. Bonhoeffer acknowledged the discomfort we have with this story. Surely something else happened between the call of Jesus and those fishermen's response. Surely

they knew him before and had been thinking about, maybe even talking about following him: a kind of sabbatical, a stint in the Peace Corps to get their lives in order, a mid-life crisis even. Bonhoeffer concluded that the story is there at the beginning of the first Gospel to be written, in the tight, spare rhetoric in which Mark cast it, precisely to nail down forever that the essence of this thing is the call and the response; not the theology of the Sadducees or the disciplined ethics of the Pharisees, but precisely the call of Jesus and the answer.

That dynamic, or something very close to it, turns out also to be the essence of mental health, of becoming a full and alive human being. We become who we are as a product of our choice. We are at our best committing ourselves to some purpose other than our own amusement.

John D. Rockefeller III urged people in a speech one time "to become involved personally and positively in the great dramas of our times rather than feeling ourselves to be impotent victims of imponderable forces. The antidote to despair," he suggested, "is to be involved."

And so it turns out to be blessing, not burden, to be called. It turns out to be our salvation to hear the voice and to answer it. W. H. Auden wrote the Forward to Hammarskjold's book in which he made this wonderful observation about his struggle with depression:

> "Hammarskjold knew exactly what his problem was - if he was not to go under, he must...find a calling in which he could forget himself - and knew that it was not in his own power to do this." (p. xv-xvi, Forward, Markings)

Part of what John Calvin and other reformed theologians added to our understanding of Christianity was in the area of vocation - which means "calling." The reformers taught that all Christians have a vocation - a calling. Subsequently, reformed theology taught that one may answer one's calling occupationally but that is not always possible. Nevertheless, all are called to be children of God, to be full human beings, to be followers of Jesus Christ. Even though we still talk as if the only person we expect to be called is the minister, we are at our best when we know that each of us has been called by Jesus Christ to be his disciple. Some of us respond to that call by being ministers; and some doctors, and lawyers, and steelworkers, and teachers, and secretaries, and cooks, and homemakers, and bankers. Within the context of whatever we chose to do with our lives each of us is called and each can respond by living as a disciple which means living with integrity and love and a passion for justice, kindness, and peace.

So the church is called, those reformed theologians taught, to hear the voice of Jesus and to obey it. There are a lot of pressures on the institutional church these days, particularly on those of us who may be called mainstream churches. We are not doing well numerically. We are not doing nearly as well as others. Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians - are cheered these days when the rate of membership decline slows a bit. But it is the glory of the church when, in spite of that, it keeps faith with what it hears its Lord calling it to do. I do not advocate institutional suicide, nor do I think there is moral merit simply in observing church decline and death. But I do affirm the glory of the church when it knows that its business is to hear the call of Jesus Christ and to follow it.

It is the glory of this church that it has tried to do that over the years: that it has asked what the Lord requires, that it has heard the call and followed. Not without debate and argument, not without doubt and questioning about what the call is, certainly not without that same argumentative reluctance most people in the Bible express when God tells them to do something. But the church has listened and heard and responded. So today and tomorrow - the glory here is that we - you are still at it: still listening, still forming committees and planning new programs, new ideas, new expressions of love and caring and a passion for justice and the peace of Christ.

That most difficult moment in the ordination trials of a candidate for ministry used to happen with a question that went something like this: "Do you sincerely believe in your heart that you have been called to the ministry?" That was difficult because there are those blessed few who could not only say yes to that, but could name the date, time, place, and what the voice sounded like and what it said. We have always been inclined to make that experience the norm: to wait for an experience like Simon and Andrew, James and John called directly by a man standing in front of them.

But that is not how it is for most of us.

Frederick Buechner, in Alphabet of Grace, tells how it was with him. He was sitting at a lunch counter in his town:

> "'I hear you are entering the ministry,' the woman said down the long table, meaning no real harm. 'Was it your own idea or were you poorly advised?' And the answer that she could not have heard even if I had given it was not an idea at all neither my own, nor anyone else's. It was a lump in the throat. It was an itching in the feet. It was a stirring in the blood...It was a sickening of the heart at the sight of misery...It was a name which when I wrote it out in a dream, I knew was a name worth dying for even if I was not brave enough to do the dying myself." (p. 109)

The call of Jesus Christ comes to most of us, not with singular clarity, but mixed in with many voices, many experiences. It comes, I believe, in our impatience, in a passion for justice, in an anger at unnecessary suffering.

It comes with the summons we feel to be faithful to something, to live for someone, to give openly and profoundly. The call of Jesus Christ comes when we know deeply that God wants us to live the kingdom - of justice and peace and kindness, here and now: that call comes in the struggles and joys, the laughter and tears, the victories and defeats of the life we are living.

The call of Jesus Christ is blessing, not burden. And it is one of the deepest, dearest truths of the faith, that it comes to each of us.

Dag Hammarskjold, just two months before he died, wrote beautifully:

"Tired
And lonely,
So tired
The heart aches.
Meltwater trickles
Down the rocks,
The fingers are numb,
The knees tremble.
It is now,
Now, that you must not give in.

"Weep
If you can,
Weep,
But do not complain.
The way chose you -
And you must be thankful." (p. 213)